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Business: Manufacturing

Manufacturing research lab opens

By ADAM LOWENSTEIN, *Rockford Register Star*

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ROCKFORD -- Call it a rebirth, a renaissance or a restart, but northern Illinois can expect manufacturing to regain prominence thanks in large part to a manufacturing research and development center called EIGERlab, U.S. Rep. Don Manzullo and others said Wednesday at the boisterous opening of the center.

"We can use all types of adjectives. Call it what you want. The EIGERlab is the new emblem of manufacturing, not just in Rockford but around the world," Manzullo said.

"We're here today because we want everybody to know we are the leader in advanced manufacturing. We're going to stay the leader, we're going to set the standard around the world, and people will come from everywhere in the world to see the machines we're making here."

EIGERlab, in the former engineering building on the Ingersoll Machine Tool campus in northwest Rockford, is about more than building machines. It is also about building minds and building companies.

Combining research space, classrooms, wireless Internet access and a shop filled with cutting-edge manufacturing technology, the 100,000-square-foot EIGERlab will allow university researchers to develop their ideas and put their theories to the test in actual machine tools.

EIGERlab also will be a business incubator to help entrepreneurs grow startups into companies that will create jobs.

"What we have here today is a perfect example, and I think the benchmark nationally, on how to approach manufacturing," said another of Wednesday's speakers, Brett Palmer, assistant secretary for legislative and intergovernmental affairs at the U.S. Department of Commerce.



Gary L. Carlson/Rockford Register Star

EIGERlab officials welcome area community and business leaders to an open house Wednesday in the Ingersoll complex on Fulton Avenue in Rockford.

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"You look to the future, look to innovation, look to research -- and not just research in the lab, but actually push it out into the real world, into real jobs, into real careers, into real people."

Other speakers Wednesday were Rockford Mayor Doug Scott, Winnebago County Board Chairman Scott Christiansen, Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity Director Jack Lavin, NIU President John Peters, and Tom McDunn, director of EIGERlab.

The event drew a standing-room-only crowd of more than 150 people.

EIGERlab represents a continuation of the tradition of innovation and entrepreneurship that marked Rockford's industrial history, whether that was making furniture, machine tools or fasteners, the speakers agreed.


"So when we talk about this particular project, it's a perfect example of what has made Rockford so great from a manufacturing standpoint over the years," Scott said.

"It's looking ahead, looking to that next step, that next thing that's going to put Rockford on the map. Innovation is a large part of our history, and the innovation that's spurred by this particular development probably will be the greatest of all of them."

Contact: alowenstein@registerstartower.com; 815-987-1339

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COLUMNIST: Chuck Sweeny

Rockford back, means business with tech test

"Rockford is back."

That was the positive, perhaps a little "in your face" attitude of the several hundred people who gathered Wednesday at the launching of EIGERlab, on the Fulton Avenue campus of Ingersoll Machine Tools Inc.

In the past two years I've written often about this far-reaching experiment that links the federal government, Northern Illinois University, Northwestern University, the University of Illinois, Rock Valley College, Alion Science & Technology, the state of Illinois, the Illinois Coalition for Science and Technology, the Council of 100, Abilities Center, Rockford Area Ventures and private industries including Hamilton Sundstrand, Ingersoll Machine Tools, W.A. Whitney, Boeing and Caterpillar.

Their audacious quest: to make Rockford the world leader in the development and commercialization of new industrial technologies, especially micro-machining. Then, help entrepreneurs and businesses exploit the processes and products developed here, so they can make money and create American jobs while doing it.

FRANKLY, I HAD my doubts that this wildly diverse group of gearheads, eggheads, bureaucrats and politicians could organize a pizza order, let alone a high-tech research center. The first story I did on the project, in early 2003, was a Roloids experience.

I mean, I was trying to herd cats. Now, they were very smart cats, it's true. But they were cats. Each 160 IQ professor I interviewed had a different interpretation of what was going on.

Finally, I said in some exasperation, "Look. I can't tell our readers what you're doing until you all agree on what it is."

Well, with some focusing from Abilities Center's Jon Lundin,

they did, and I wrote the story. They kept refining the concept to make it marketable in Washington, D.C., and U.S. Rep. Don Manzullo, R-Egan, shopped it to federal agencies, including the Pentagon, which wants American firms to develop a new generation of lightweight, inexpensive fighting vehicles.

To date, Manzullo has brought EIGERlab \$5.65 million from Uncle Sam's Club. The state is kicking in \$1.6 million and locating one of Gov. Rod Blagojevich's "Opportunity Returns" offices there. Ingersoll Machine Tools was awarded a \$2.2 million U.S. grant for micromachining research, which will be done in EIGERlab.

IT WAS DOWNRIGHT INSPIRING to see the impressive lab setting, especially one room with big windows that provide a marvelous view of Rockford Country Club's lush golf course -- they're calling that room "Greenview" -- and the auditorium, all part of the old Ingersoll operation.


As speakers reminded the several hundred guests Wednesday, Rockford industry has a history of confronting economic lemons and making lemonade. When the furniture business literally went south, we made things out of metal. We kept inventing new ways to use metal.


In a few decades an obscure adding machine company became a world leader in aviation technology -- Sundstrand. At Ingersoll Milling Machine, the Gaylords' commitment to technology advancement resulted in the world's most sophisticated machine tools. The list of Rockford's industrial innovations would take up pages in this newspaper.

Reeling from the loss of 13,000 factory jobs since 2001, we Rockfordians have kind of forgotten our history. But adversity can either breed resignation to failure or creative defiance.

I choose the latter. Let the Forest City's future begin at EIGERlab.

Call Political Editor Chuck Sweeny at 815-987-1372 or e-mail csweeny@registerstartower.com

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